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UNCLAS HALIFAX 000174

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MAJOR DRUG BUST OFF COAST OF NOVA SCOTIA

REF: Halifax 172

1. (U) The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, working with officials from Montreal seized 500 kilograms of cocaine aboard the Antiguan 15-meter sailing vessel the "Friend Ship" on Monday, July 5, 2004. The seizure was worth an estimated value of more than C\$18 million.

2. (U) The year-long international operation dubbed "Project Columbie" by the Montreal police force was the second major cocaine seizure in the Nova Scotia in less than a week. When police in Montreal learned a group of Quebec residents were conspiring with South American cocaine suppliers to smuggle tons of drugs from the Caribbean and South American into Canada and England, they worked together with other Federal Canadian government agencies and officials from Antigua and French officials from the Caribbean Island of St. Martin. According to local broadcast news and newspaper reports, the "Friend Ship" left Antigua on June 23, 2004. The sailing vessel's first stop was to be Nova Scotia where the drugs were destined for markets in Canada. The drugs were to be off-loaded in the Village of Moser River, about 90 kilometers east of Halifax. The drugs were then to be hidden in a private residence in Moser River before being distributed to other provinces within Canada. The bust resulted in nine people being arrested from Quebec, Nova Scotia and Antigua. The "Friend Ship" has been seized and is currently being held under close guard at the Department of National Defence property in Halifax Harbor.

3. (SBU) According to a senior RCMP official, the shipment was from Venezuela, as was the case with reftel. The official lamented that beyond the arrests, there would be little impact on drug flows to Canada. "To get a feeling for the size of the traffic, you only have to know that the price for cocaine remains unchanged following each bust." Arguing that the traffickers target Canada because of the lower risk (the U.S. imposes a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years, whereas Canada only imposes 8 years), the official offered their opinion that Canada must stiffen its drug laws if it wishes to significantly impact the trade over the long-term.

HILL